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A History of Toluca

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Introduction

Nestled in the heart of central Mexico, Toluca de Lerdo—known to most simply as Toluca—has long played a pivotal role in the story of this nation. As the capital of the State of Mexico and the seat of its own municipality, Toluca stands atop the Valley of Toluca, just west of the Mexico City megapolis. Set at an altitude that ranks among the highest of any North American capital, it is shaped not only by its geography but by a rich convergence of Indigenous, colonial, and modern influences.

This book, *A History of Toluca*, is a nonfiction exploration that traces the city's origins and its transformations across millennia. Before Spanish ships ever neared the coast of the New World, the valley was home to a vibrant patchwork of peoples and cultures—Matlatzinca, Otomi, Mazahua, and Nahuatl—whose legacies endure beneath the surface of today's bustling streets. Their settlements, languages, and conflict with the great Aztec empire set the stage for Toluca's birth as an imperial and then colonial center. Significant archaeological sites, legends, and even the very names that echo through the city's neighborhoods hold witness to these ancient times.

With the arrival of the Spanish in the early 16th century, Toluca entered a profound period of change. The city's foundations were laid anew, Christian churches rose upon old ceremonial ground, and a colonial society emerged—one deeply intertwined with the forces that shaped New Spain. Over time, Toluca grew from a rural valley settlement into a city of both political and economic importance, producing goods famed throughout the region and fostering unique cultural traditions. Its streets became arenas for struggles during independence, reform, and revolution, each era leaving indelible marks on the city's fabric.

The modern era saw Toluca transformed yet again. The coming of the railroad, electric lighting, and eventually sprawling industries changed not only the city's economy but its very identity. As Toluca became a center for manufacturing and commerce, it also embraced cultural renewal, developing museums, festivals, and educational institutions that drew on its diverse inheritance. Yet with rapid growth came new challenges: urbanization pressed against the valley's environmental limits, population surged, and the city's relationship with neighboring Mexico City became increasingly complex and vital.

Today, Toluca stands as a dynamic urban hub—modern yet mindful of its storied past. Its reputation for industry is matched by its rich artistic and social traditions, its architectural treasures, and its proximity to the dramatic Nevado de Toluca. All these elements invite us to consider how identity is shaped not only by the passage of time, but also by the resilience and innovation of those who call Toluca home.

In the chapters that follow, we will travel from the earliest days of human settlement to the present, exploring epochs of upheaval, transformation, and continuity. At every turn, Toluca's story reflects the broader currents of Mexican history—while also standing apart as a city with a unique voice and spirit.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Valley Before Toluca: Prehistoric Origins

Long before the Spanish arrived with their banners and beliefs, and centuries before the great Aztec Empire extended its reach into central Mexico, the land where Toluca now stands was already ancient. The Valley of Toluca, a high-altitude basin cradled by volcanic peaks, holds a history that stretches back not mere centuries, but millennia. Its story begins in a time so distant it feels almost mythical, a period when mammoths roamed and the first intrepid humans made their way into the Americas. To understand Toluca, we must first understand the valley itself, and the deep roots planted by its earliest, almost forgotten, inhabitants.

Imagine the valley as it was, say, twelve thousand years ago. The landscape would have been different, shaped by the last vestiges of the ice age. Glaciers would have retreated from the higher peaks, but the climate was likely cooler and perhaps wetter than it is today. Lush vegetation would have covered the valley floor and slopes, supporting a diverse array of megafauna. This was a world teeming with life, a vast, fertile stage set for the arrival of humanity.

Evidence suggests that humans first ventured into this challenging yet promising environment around 12,000 BCE. These were not farmers building settlements, but highly mobile hunter-gatherers, following the movements of game and the availability of wild plants. Their lives would have been a constant negotiation with the natural world, their survival dependent on keen observation, intimate knowledge of the land, and sophisticated hunting techniques. They left behind traces of their passage: stone tools, projectile points crafted with remarkable skill, and perhaps the remains of their prey at ancient kill sites.

Finding these early traces is a painstaking process for archaeologists. The sheer depth of time means that many artifacts are buried deep beneath layers of sediment deposited over millennia. River systems shifted, volcanic activity reshaped the landscape, and countless generations lived and died, each adding to the archaeological record – or disturbing the layers of those who came before. Yet, persistent investigation has revealed enough to confirm the valley's long human occupation.

The Valley of Toluca's unique geography played a crucial role in attracting and sustaining these early populations. Situated at a high elevation, it offered access to varied ecological zones, from the valley floor to the mountain slopes. This diversity meant a wider range of resources was available throughout the year. Lakes and

wetlands, likely more extensive in prehistoric times, would have provided water and attracted waterfowl, fish, and other aquatic life, supplementing the diet of terrestrial game like deer, rabbits, and perhaps even larger animals now extinct in the region.

Life for these early inhabitants was undoubtedly harsh by modern standards. Without agriculture, they were constantly tied to the rhythm of the seasons and the movements of animals. Shelters would have been temporary, perhaps caves or simple structures built from available materials. Social groups were likely small, extended families or bands cooperating for hunting and defense. Communication, knowledge, and technology were passed down through oral tradition, ensuring the survival of the group in a challenging world.

The monumental Nevado de Toluca volcano, known in Nahuatl as *Xinantécatl*, would have been a constant, imposing presence in their lives. While its major eruptive periods predate human arrival in the valley by a considerable margin, its slopes and caldera would have provided resources such as obsidian, a valuable volcanic glass used for tools and weapons. The mountain's imposing form likely held spiritual significance for these early peoples, shaping their worldview and potentially featuring in their nascent mythologies.

Over thousands of years, these early hunter-gatherer societies slowly adapted and evolved. They refined their toolkits, developed more efficient hunting strategies, and gained an ever-deeper understanding of the valley's ecosystems. While the archaeological record from this very early period is sparse compared to later eras, each discovery, whether a single stone flake or a concentration of artifacts, provides a tiny window into a vast and largely unknown past.

The transition from purely nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to more settled, agricultural ways of life was a gradual process that unfolded over millennia across Mesoamerica. In the Valley of Toluca, this shift would have begun long after the first humans arrived, likely influenced by developments in nearby core areas of domestication. Early experimentation with cultivating local plants, perhaps maize, beans, or squash, would have supplemented hunting and gathering, gradually leading to a more sedentary existence and eventually, the development of more complex societies.

Understanding this deep prehistory is crucial because it provides the foundation upon which all later cultures in the valley were built. The environmental knowledge accumulated over thousands of years, the established pathways through the landscape, and the initial patterns of human interaction with the valley's resources all laid the groundwork for the development of distinct cultural groups. The high altitude, the climate, the fertile soils – these unchanging geographical realities have shaped human life in the valley from the very beginning.

While the names and languages of these earliest inhabitants are lost to time, their presence is a fundamental part of the valley's history. They were the first to navigate its terrain, drink from its rivers, and gaze upon the majestic Nevado. Their adaptability and resilience in the face of a challenging environment allowed for the continuous human occupation of the valley, paving the way for the emergence of the more complex and visible cultures that would later flourish here.

The period from 12,000 BCE up to the emergence of the settled agricultural villages that would give rise to distinct ethnic groups like the Matlatzinca, Otomi, Mazahua, and Nahuatl is a vast span of time, far longer than the combined history of the Aztec, Colonial, and modern eras. It is a testament to the enduring appeal and potential of the Valley of Toluca as a place for human habitation.

Archaeological investigation continues to shed light on these earliest periods. Each new excavation holds the promise of uncovering more pieces of this ancient puzzle, helping to reconstruct the lives and landscapes of the valley's first people. While the details remain frustratingly few, the evidence is clear: the story of the Toluca Valley is a story of deep time, rooted in the movements of the first humans to set foot in this high, central Mexican basin. Their legacy is the simple fact of human presence itself, the initial thread in a tapestry that would eventually weave together the vibrant history of Toluca.

The valley's resources, its strategic location, and its inherent challenges shaped the trajectories of the people who called it home, from the earliest hunter-gatherers adapting to a post-ice age world to the more settled communities that would eventually define the region. This deep past, while often invisible beneath the modern city, is the bedrock upon which everything that followed was built.

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